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WHA/CEN FOR FEELEY AND THOMPSON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/23/2017

TAGS: [ES](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#)

SUBJECT: WHA/CEN OFFICE DIRECTOR VISIT TO EL SALVADOR

Classified By: Ambassador Charles Glazer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d) of
E.O. 12958

¶1. (U) Summary: WHA/CEN Office Director John Feeley and El Salvador Desk Officer Hillary Thompson visited San Salvador November 15-16. Feeley explained to Salvadoran interlocutors the way ahead on the Central American component of the Merida Initiative and stressed the key role that SICA must play in coordinating regional public security policy and cooperation. With all Salvadoran interlocutors, Feeley highlighted the U.S. desire for free, fair, and transparent elections in ¶2009. End summary.

¶2. (U) On November 15, Feeley met separately with Presidential candidate Arturo Zablah, Minister of Public Security and Presidential pre-candidate Rene Figueroa, Ambassador Guillermo Melendez, Director of the Foreign Policy Unit at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and senior representatives of the FMLN. He briefed each group on the key elements of the Merida Initiative, stressing the public security component for El Salvador while noting the Initiative's regional approach. The plan was generally well received by all interlocutors.

¶3. (U) Zablah briefed on the status of his team's negotiations with CD, PDC, and FDR on mounting a joint campaign for his presidential bid and offering a third option to voters interested in looking beyond traditional ARENA-FMLN competition. (Note: Those plans have subsequently come apart, as PDC has declared its intention to name its own presidential candidate. End note.)

¶4. (U) In his meeting at the MFA, Ambassador Guillermo Melendez, Director of the MFA Foreign Policy Unit, raised the possibility of creating a regional witness protection program and expressed an interest in exploring linking a witness protection program to the Transnational Anti-Gang (TAG) program. Feeley raised the problem of El Salvador not accepting electronic signatures as part of DHS's electronic Travel Document (eTD) system, which Melendez agreed to look into.

¶5. (U) In the meeting with FMLN representatives, Hugo Martinez and Medardo Gonzalez discussed the themes the FMLN expects to pursue during the campaign (security, rising cost of living, and energy). Martinez and Gonzalez both made clear the FMLN's desire to develop and improve relations with the U.S., something they see as key to a successful campaign and future government. Feeley stressed the importance of transparency and commitment to a democratic political system,

underscoring the strong U.S. desire to remain engaged with the Salvadoran people through development assistance (MCC), commercial ties (CAFTA), and our emerging security cooperation (Merida Initiative).

¶16. (C) On November 16, Feeley and MILGROUP Commander met briefly with Minister of Defense Otto Romero to thank the Minister for El Salvador's strong support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and congratulate him on the professionalism and dedication to duty displayed by Salvadoran forces. Minister Romero expressed gratitude for U.S. support to the ESAF, discussed the possibility of the formation of a regional peace keeping force, and, towards the conclusion of the conversation, expressed his hope that the United States might consider formalizing this extensive mil-mil relationship by means of a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) designation.

¶17. (C) The U.S. delegation briefed ARENA Deputies Rolando Alvarenga, Milena Calderon de Escalon, and Guillermo Gallegos on the Merida Initiative and its potential impact on El Salvador. The Deputies expressed their concern over the possibility of Mauricio Funes leading the FMLN to an electoral triumph in the 2009 Presidential elections and alleged that the FMLN will be the recipient of significant financial assistance from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez; as a result, the Frente will be able to mount a far more sophisticated, organized campaign than in elections past. Alvarenga closed the meeting expressing his fervent hope that an ARENA victory would enable the "only true friends the U.S. has in the region" to keep the mutually-beneficial relationship intact.

¶18. (C) During a working lunch with Rodrigo Avila, the Director of the National Civilian Police (PNC), Avila gave a brief summary of the advances the PNC has made against both organized crime and common street violence. While generally upbeat, he noted that funding shortfalls and lack of manpower seriously hamper his ability to turn the corner against consistently high levels of crime. They discussed the important role that the Central American Integration System (SICA) must play in coordinating member states' public security policies and coordination with U.S., EU, and other possible donors to better combat street gangs, organized crime, and other regional threats to public security and help national police forces. Feeley later met with SICA Secretary General Anibal Quinonez and Director of Political/Legal Affairs Erich Vilchez to stress the importance of crafting a regional response to pressing regional issues such as transnational street gangs and narcotics trafficking. Quinonez noted that the impact of Ortega returning to power in Nicaragua was being felt throughout the region, and all indications are that the Nicaraguan government appears to be extremely weak. Both Quinonez and Vilches argued that SICA needed additional resources to adequately address regional security and energy issues.

¶19. (C) Feeley and the Economic Counselor met with Technical Secretary to the President Eduardo Ayala Grimaldi to discuss

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CAFTA-DR, a topic of great interest to Ayala, one of the lead negotiators of the agreement. Feeley raised regional integration issues, which Ayala said the GOES was pursuing on several fronts, e.g., through a customs union and with SICA. In response to Feeley's question, Ayala noted that the GOES was already working to improve its MCC eligibility performance indicators.

¶10. (C) Comment: The visit was an excellent opportunity to engage key Salvadoran contacts while the Merida Initiative is still front and center in both the media and Washington policy circles. Without exception, and notably including the opposition FMLN party, Salvadoran interlocutors reacted positively, and expressed gratitude for the Bush administration seeking to take decisive steps to address pressing regional public security concerns. All stated their hope that the \$50 million requested in the FY08 supplemental would be a down payment on what they said they needed to be a

sustained, multi-year program if it is to have a serious effect. Swift approval of Merida Initiative funding for Central America, followed by expeditious delivery of promised law enforcement and security assistance, will provide irrefutable evidence of the U.S. commitment to regional prosperity and the furtherance of democratic governance. End comment.
Glazer